

CHAPTER 1

Creating Classrooms to Engage Learners

Instead of looking at educational settings . . . as having clear boundaries and identifiable contents, I look at them as extensive in space and time, fluid in form and content; as intersections of multiple networks shaping cities, communities, schools, pedagogies, and teacher and student practices.

—NESPOR (1997, p. xiii)

Just as Nespor (1997) views schools as having fluid boundaries, we describe preschool, kindergarten, and first- and second-grade classrooms as also having fluid boundaries where the home lives of students influence their school lives and their school lives influence their home lives. This chapter is grounded in this perspective and provides examples that demonstrate what these permeable boundaries might look like in practice. We feel this first chapter in a book about English language learners (ELLs) is critical to future discussions of teaching and learning in literacy. We believe that the physical and emotional spaces created by teachers are central to the literacy learning of all students and in particular ELLs.

ELLs are the fastest-growing student population in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), between 2001 and 2002 the total K–12 enrollment growth was 12% whereas ELLs' enrollment growth was 95%. In 2000, more than 3 million school-age children were ELLs with 57% of them Spanish speakers and 18% Asian/Pacific Islanders (www.ncela.gwu.edu/ellcensus90s.pdf). In 16 states there has been more than a 200% enrollment growth of ELLs be-

tween 1992 and 2002. California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas have experienced the greatest growth of all states. However, even in states like North Dakota and Rhode Island, 10% of their students are learning English as a new language (Freeman & Freeman, 2000).

Although there are certainly many configurations to support ELLS, such as bilingual education classes or English-language learning support outside the classroom, most mainstream classroom teachers have the primary responsibility for developing students' competence in English as they teach these students to read and write (Au, 2002; Neufeld & Fitzgerald, 2001). Perhaps not surprising is that most teachers have had little or no professional training in facilitating English learning and literacy development for ELLs (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2004). For this reason and others, many teachers find meeting their ELLs' learning needs a challenge. They worry about how to teach a student who does not speak the language of the school. ELLs experience a similar challenge as they are often required to leave their home identity, experiences, and literacy knowledge at the classroom door. Once they cross the threshold of the classroom, their home language and literacy experiences are frequently not valued or are ignored as teachers attempt to build oral competence and literacy knowledge in English (Smagorinsky & Smith, 2002).

In this chapter, we discuss the physical and social/emotional environment of the classroom. We share ways to build connections between home and school cultures (see Chapter 2 to learn about more extensive ways to engage parents), and we provide examples of activities that support a students' home culture and language even when all or the majority of instruction is in English.

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe the critical aspects of creating the physical environment of a classroom.
 - Describe the importance of the emotional/social environment of the classroom.
 - Describe the important characteristics of exemplary teachers of ELLs.
 - Describe the intersections of physical and emotional/social environments.
 - Describe strategies to support ELLs in classrooms.
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THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Why begin a book focused on ELLs' literacy with a section on the physical environment? We believe that the environment of the classroom facilitates the comfort level of students who are learning English as they enter school. As they come to school for the first time, they rely on the structure of the classroom to provide clues as to what they are expected to do and where. They learn that when in centers, they can quietly chat with fellow students, for instance.

Teachers should think about the classroom environment long before school actually begins. Teachers plan the orientation of tables or desks in the primary grades. Just where will they place all the furniture? They then consider the other spaces within the room. How will students access computers and where will the computers be? How will materials be placed so that students have easy access? Organizing a classroom space may sound very simple—just look at a room and decide what goes where—but it isn't. The physical organization of a classroom can result in a structure that supports learning or interferes with it.

First, teachers need to think about the instruction they will provide students and how the physical structure of the classroom will support it. Instruction guides the placement of furniture and supplies. In preschool and primary grades, teachers need spaces for whole-class instruction, small-group instruction, and centers. Whole-group instruction often occurs either on the carpet or with students at their desks. Teachers need to consider where they will configure:

- Whole-class instruction with space at tables or desks and on the carpet.
- Small-group instruction, typically at a small table.
- Centers for students.

As these places are determined, it is also important to not have centers near the location for small-group instruction. When students work together in centers, they can get noisy and interfere with small-group instruction. In addition, centers in preschool often take more space than those in first and second grades. In preschool, students may engage in a housekeeping area or other dramatic play areas, block areas, and so on. These require room for movement. In first and second grade, and often kindergarten as well, centers are located on tables.

TAKE A MOMENT

Use a paper that represents the configuration of your classroom or a rectangular shape if you are unsure or do not yet have a classroom. Plan where whole-class instruction, small-group instruction, and centers (plan for five) might be located. Be mindful of noise level in centers. You might want to think about the fixed aspects of the room, such as a sink, bathrooms, and so on.

Once the big areas for instruction are planned, a teacher can tailor each area so that needed materials are included. Following are some considerations for organization.

1. There should be an easel and an overhead projector near the large-group instruction area. Often teachers have storage on the back of the easel or on the overhead cart for letter cards, books, and so on.

2. The small-group instruction area needs storage for white boards (for individual student writing), paper, books, pencils, chart paper, and so on.

3. Centers need supporting materials where students can store them efficiently. For example, in preschool, students know where to put blocks when they are finished constructing with them. In primary grades, students know where to place writing materials when they have finished. Storage and organization vary as to the type of center. Play centers require different organization than do literacy centers. Play centers may have tubs for large blocks whereas literacy centers may have trays for papers and small containers for pencils and crayons.

The physical structure of a classroom is very important to all young learners, and in particular to ELLs. The structure of the room provides predictability for students. They know where activities occur and what is expected during each activity. By having these parts of their classrooms as established places with predictable routines, they are able to focus on instruction and learning.

Literacy Center

The literacy center or area is a very important place for young learners. Here they can explore books and other reading materials. Guthrie

(2002) notes that an inviting space in the room focused on literacy results in students more interested in books and writing. Sometimes teachers combine the more traditional reading center with a writing center. They portion out a part of the literacy center with writing materials. However this space is configured, it is important for students, even as young as 2 or 3, to have a special place to explore books and writing. A goal for the literacy center is that it easily accommodates five to six children at one time.

In our experience, we have seen teachers frame off this space. They may have a bookshelf against the back wall and lower shelves to the side, resulting in a U-shaped space. Thus they can observe children in this center as they instruct or chat with children in other parts of the room. They also find comfortable pillows or a sofa for children to relax in as they read. And in some rooms we have seen teachers who place stuffed animals in the literacy center so that small children can read to their favorite bear. A stuffed animal helps make the center a safe structure for ELLs to practice newly developed English oral language.

Once the physical space of the literacy center is established, teachers collect books for students to explore. It is important to provide a great variety of texts. These texts might include:

- *Board or cloth books.* These are appropriate for our youngest students. They also are engaging for students who are learning English as they often center on simple concepts.

- *Concept books.* These books generally have no storyline. They just identify pictures with words. They help ELLs learn English equivalents for objects with which they may already be familiar.

- *Environmental print.* This is text that children see in their world, home, and classroom. Students might create their own environmental print books in English or their home language or a combination of both for exploration.

- *Wordless books.* These books have storylines without words to support them. The young child creates a story to match the illustrations.

- *Catalogues, television guides, and newspaper advertising.* Although not typically on the list of materials for a literacy center, we consider them important. They are frequently in homes and thus familiar. Students can also identify the pictures within them. With the advertising from newspapers they can pretend to shop for food for home.

- *Children's magazines.* Magazines like *Zoo Books* or *Your Big Backyard* engage students in discussions centered on the illustrations.

- *Alphabet books.* These books focus children's attention on the alphabet and often extend vocabulary as ELLs learn about items that begin with each letter.

- *Number books.* These books target children's attention to numbers.

- *Books connected to television shows.* These books again connect television watching at home with a print extension. Children will be familiar with the characters and this familiarity should stimulate conversation, especially for ELLs.

- *Traditional literature.* Although many ELLs may not be familiar with nursery rhymes or fairytales, these serve as reading for teachers to students who then revisit the stories and rhymes in the literacy center. It is helpful to have multiple copies so that small groups of students can explore the same book. Moreover, once the teacher has shared a book, it often becomes a favorite that children clamor to read.

- *Easy-to-read books.* These are books that students with sufficient literacy knowledge can read on their own. There should be predictable text available as well as decodable text for independent practice.

- *Informational books.* Such books serve as a stimulus for discussion and are often the preferred books of young children. Similar to traditional literature, once read by teachers, they offer opportunities for students to revisit them.

Teachers generally feature some of these books on bookshelves so that children can see the covers for easy selection. Other books may be organized in tubs marked by category (animals, alphabet books, etc.) where students can explore those they want to investigate. Later in the year, the teacher might break the animal books up into groupings such as pets, zoo animals, or farm animals. Later the books might be reconfigured into mammals, reptiles, or insects. Each successive grouping recognizes the more sophisticated knowledge of students.

Within the literacy center or in another location in the room, teachers also display books and materials related to the current theme, author, or illustrator study. Students are welcome to explore these books independently. It is important that many books focus on the same topic or theme so ELLs can constantly revisit similar content to develop

their knowledge base, vocabulary, oral language, and reading and writing competence.

Other parts of the literacy center include a listening center, with a selection of nursery rhymes and books for students to listen to. Within this center is a computer or two for reading, exploring, and writing. Students may engage with the computer to listen to a story, they may explore a website, or they may create a story using a program to support young students' writing. Finally, to support writing, there would be an area with pencils, crayons, and paper for student writing.

Play and Dramatic Play Centers

Although these centers are not frequently seen in first and second grades, they are very important for preschool and kindergarten children. If teachers organize the center around a theme, they increase children's opportunities for language and literacy play (Neuman & Roskos, 1993). For example, if the instructional theme is transportation, the teacher might create an airport or a garage. Here children would dress as flight attendants or mechanics. They would have props that support literacy but are tied to the theme. They may have repair slips or plane tickets (see Figure 1.1). They may have to list all the passengers on the plane. They may need to take drink orders. As a mechanic, they would note repairs and the costs of repairs. They jot down phone numbers so they can contact the client when the work is complete. We include pictures so that children who cannot read or do not know English have clues to what is expected.

Teachers also want a supply of books related to the theme available for students. They include realia (real objects) in the center, like a toy wrench or hammer, so that students can pretend to repair a truck, for example. Other examples of literacy-enriched dramatic play centers might be a post office, a doctor's office, a veterinarian's office, a supermarket, and a restaurant, among others.

To extend the theme to home, teachers create boxes or plastic bags with a book and artifacts related to the theme inside. For example, there may be a book about trucks and a small truck with paper to record repairs. Through these collections, parents and students are connected in literacy-based activities that may not be typical experiences in their homes. As students mature in their literacy knowledge, these containers

 <p>Passengers</p>	<div data-bbox="727 401 927 436" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">Drink Orders</div> <p data-bbox="748 485 841 510">Soft Drink</p>  <p data-bbox="748 581 786 606">Milk</p>  <p data-bbox="748 674 802 699">Water</p> 
 <p>Plane Ticket</p> <p>Name: _____</p> <p>Number: _____</p>	

FIGURE 1.1. Airport forms.

include text that they read to their parents as well as a book that a parent would read or discuss with them (Neuman, 1999). Figure 1.2 shows a child and her teacher as they investigate a collection that will be going home. In this case, the school purchased these collections from a publisher (Lakeshore) to save preparation time.

These centers and take-home activities support students in literacy play that is engaged in by adults. As students participate, teachers can keep informal records of the conversation and activities of students. They might also ask parents to record interesting observations about their child's engagement with these materials at home.

Labeling the Room and Activities

After the room is physically organized, teachers want to stand back and think about other text support for young learners. They may develop a bulletin board to support the first theme and they may also create a bulletin board or sign to indicate the literacy and writing areas.



FIGURE 1.2. Take-home collection.

Once students arrive, it is important to engage them in labeling important parts of the room. We recommend that teachers participate in this process with their students so that they connect the labels to things or activities. For instance, they might label the door, sink, teacher's desk, and so on. It would be beneficial to students if these objects also carried a label in their home language. For example, table can be labeled with *table* in English, *mesa* in Spanish, *teiburu* in Japanese, and 桌子 in Chinese. Older students and parents can help with these labels.

In addition to labels for things in the classroom, we have seen teachers use labels to support children's activities. For example, when children play with blocks, they draw a sketch and label what they have built in a notebook that is at the block center before the construction is demolished. Students might also record the experiment they participated in at the science center. For almost every activity in the class, there is a notebook or chart for students to record their activities. In this way, students see real uses for literacy. See Figure 1.3 for an example by a young preschooler, Micah, who drew a sketch and labeled his train creation before it had to be cleaned up.

Teachers also take advantage of the importance of a child's name. Students' names are placed on cubbies or book tubs, for example. Children find their personal belongings here and they also use class-



FIGURE 1.3. Sketch of train with label.

mates' names in their writing. Often, preschoolers and kindergartners take great delight in copying classmates' names and reading these lists.

Labeling in a classroom is a constant—not something done at the beginning of the year and later ignored. The labels attached to objects and activities provide instruction to students in how words are connected to print. These labels, after a child's name, become the first words students can read and attach meaning to. ELLs in particular understand the connections between an object, its label, and its pronunciation.

Although the classroom's physical environment can be changed, it comes with consequences. If tables or centers are moved, young children struggle with where they are to be and what is expected of them. This is even more pronounced for ELLs who rely on classroom structure to signal expectations. It will take a few days before the new configuration becomes automatic to students. Teachers often struggle with inappropriate behavior from students as they get accustomed to the new organization.

THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The social and emotional environment of a classroom is one of the most critical characteristics in students' success. Unlike the physical environment, the social and emotional environment is not as apparent when first walking into a classroom. However, there are parts of the social and emotional environment that are observable. For example, observers can note whether children are expected to sit quietly all day. They can also observe to see whether student work is evident in the room. They can observe whether students understand and respect the routines established in the classroom. And, most important, they can observe and see the relationship between the teacher and the students.

In this section we consider several important parts of the social and emotional environment. They include the importance of the teacher, social interaction in the classroom, rules and routines, and differentiated instruction.

The Importance of the Teacher

Much of the research centered on teachers in urban settings, where the numbers of ELLs are the highest, reports that many don't last through their first year (Brown, 2002). Ladson-Billings (2001) noted that in Chicago there are about 1,500 teachers hired each year, and in Los Angeles about 5,000 largely because of teacher turnover. These teachers feel frustrated with their teacher education programs and the circumstances in which they find themselves as they enter their teaching career. They discover they are not prepared to deal with the challenges of urban schools and the students who attend them and, in particular, how to support the learning of ELLs.

The students who attend these schools and their parents are in a parallel situation. They find it difficult to work with their neighborhood school when teachers infrequently stay. Students find it challenging to learn when their teachers are short-timers and are not committed to the school community.

The bleak circumstances just described do not have to permeate all classrooms that find themselves rich with ELLs. We describe ways that teachers can be change agents for students and provide them with an environment that supports their learning. Teachers can come to value diversity when working with students who come to school with rich lit-

eracy traditions different from those supported in school and with language backgrounds not represented in their classrooms.

Becoming Culturally Responsive

Not unexpectedly, the first task in becoming culturally sensitive to students is to explore one's own beliefs about teaching and learning (Xu, 2000a, 2000b). Before reading further take a moment and describe how you learned in school and what you think about exemplary teaching, especially as it pertains to ELLs.

TAKE A MOMENT

Who are you as a learner?
What are the characteristics that describe an exemplary teacher of ELLs?
What literacy experiences do you value from your school experiences?
How do ELLs learn best?

Once a teacher understands who he or she is as a learner and the values attached to being an exemplary teacher of ELLs, this teacher is ready to consider the ethnic, cultural, and language profiles of students in his or her classroom. Some of these considerations might include:

- What are the social relationships expected between students and teachers? How does the teacher talk to students? How are students expected to talk to teachers? Are these expectations variable and based on learning situations? For example, can students freely talk to teachers when they are in centers or is there a protocol that requires students always to be called on to talk? Can students use their home language in school?
- What are the social relationships between students? Can they work together? What language are they expected to use?
- What is the best way to improve students' English-language proficiency?
- How much of a student's culture should be recognized if he or she is to succeed in middle-class America?
- How much homework should a teacher assign? Should teachers expect parents to support students with homework? What

should teachers expect of parents who do not speak, read, or write English?

- How do the books a teacher chooses represent or engage his or her students?

Not all these questions have easy answers. They take time to reflect on, and they certainly change as teachers have more experience and success working with students who are learning English as they learn to read and write. What is important is that teachers think about such questions as they begin and continue to work with ELLs. These are important questions to explore with other teachers. This reflection and decision-making process are necessary for teachers to be successful in engaging their students in purposeful instruction.

In writing about culturally responsive teaching, Ladson-Billings (1994) reiterates the importance of teacher expectations of student ability—low expectations result in low achievement and high expectations result in high achievement for students, a statement that is still important today. She sees culturally responsive teaching as a way to seek excellence—where teachers, students, and families share responsibility for learning. Teachers serve as *conductors* or *coaches*; they believe that all students are capable of excellence and they assume responsibility to facilitate and coordinate learning opportunities. Ladson-Billings (1994) values teaching as an art where teachers “see themselves as part of the community. They demonstrate a connectedness with all of their students and encourage that same connectedness between the students” (p. 25). Expectations are critically important to ELLs literacy success. If teachers and their school do not really believe that ELLs can be proficient literacy learners then ELLs will mirror this belief—and the school and its teachers would have to own this result.

The belief that all students can learn with appropriate support and connections between home, school, and community is important to becoming a culturally responsive teacher. Further, culturally responsive teachers engage in strategies to support individual student learning. A few of these practices include:

- Creating a classroom that values the voices of all—a community of learners. Seeking ways to connect families with schools. Valuing family involvement even when parents do not speak English (see Chapter 2 for many practical suggestions).

- Treating students as individuals, and the willingness to revise instruction to meet individual student needs.
- Appreciating student voices.
- Facilitating knowledge and pride in various ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds.
- Believing that all students are capable.

Throughout this book, we share specific ways to support these ideas.

Becoming a Caring Teacher

Gordon (1999) writes that the “best urban teachers show warmth and affection to their students and give priority to the development of their relationships with students as an avenue to student growth” (p. 305). This belief stands in contrast to the organization of many teachers and schools that focus on discipline first. Although discipline is important, so that schools are safe places that support learning, it cannot be considered without focusing on building relationships with students and families. For example, in one school we visited, the rule was that no students were allowed into the building before the morning bell rang. This was a schoolwide rule to prevent student misbehavior without supervision. We witnessed students lining up outside the classroom door, hoping to gain an opportunity to chat informally with their teacher when he or she appeared. In this same school, one teacher departed from the practice (with principal support) and invited students into the room when they arrived at school. Students helped prepare the room for instruction as they chatted with their teacher. An interesting observation from this teacher was that none of his students “received citations for inappropriate behavior.” He believed, “It is about the relationships. They know I will be disappointed or angry with them if they disrupt learning or engage in inappropriate behavior on the playground or in the cafeteria. We have an agreement that we are here to learn. They know I care about them and they care about me.”

In *School Kids/Street Kids*, Flores-González (2002) discusses the development of students who become school kids (those who succeed in school) or street kids (those who may attend school but are not a part of it). In her book she considers the school and classroom envi-

ronment as the most important factor for students. In particular, she highlights the relationships students have with teachers. Throughout her book there are quotes from students describing teachers who made them want to stay and perform in school, similar to the teacher previously described. Flores-González synthesizes these remarks and highlights the importance of elementary teachers to students developing a school-kid identity. She writes, “These close and intense relationships with teachers fostered commitment to school” (p. 33). Students chose to stay in school and become active participants in their middle and high schools’ cultures by joining clubs or participating in sports because of the relationships they developed with their elementary school teachers.

The literature is filled with documentation to support the need for caring teachers. Following are a few examples:

- Students become engaged in school when they feel competent. To feel competent they must have a sense of belonging that is developed through meaningful dialogue with teachers and peers (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992).
- Students’ attitudes toward literacy are shaped by classroom contexts and relationships with teachers (McCarthy, 2002).
- Building rapport and relationships with children provides the power to inspire children (Maniates & Doerr, 2001).
- Teachers who make a difference are those who develop relationships with students (Ogle, 2004).

Becoming a caring teacher is certainly about relationships. However, it goes beyond just relationship building. Caring teachers are willing to work with students until they master a skill in a new language, for instance. They do not allow students to fail. They find ways to scaffold students’ current learning so that they can understand the next conceptually challenging information or process. For example, a teacher may search for picture support to help an ELL with challenging vocabulary. Being a caring teacher means being responsible for student learning by providing opportunities to support and engage students. It also means acknowledging the difficult life circumstances that children may live in but not feeling sorry for them. It means respecting them as capable learners (Weiner, 1999).

Becoming a Teacher Who Builds Resiliency in Students

Benard (2004) writes, “One of the most important and consistent findings in resilience research is the power of schools, especially of teachers, to turn a child’s life from risk to resilience” (p. 65). Much of the research on resiliency overlaps with work focused on culturally responsive classrooms or caring teachers. We are presenting resiliency here, as it is important for teachers to consider as they work with ELLs, many of whom find themselves living in circumstances of poverty.

Resiliency often provides the explanation as to why some children succeed in school when others do not (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2004a). Resilient children find ways to cope with life circumstances and look to the future. This view moves beyond language competency and explores the life circumstances of ELLs.

Benard (1997) described characteristics of teachers who increased students’ resilience. She noted that these teachers modeled three essential dimensions of resiliency: caring and establishing relationships with adults, frequently students’ teachers; providing numerous opportunities for students to participate and contribute to the classroom community; and setting high expectations. She further described these teachers as ones who do not judge students but understand that they are doing the best they can. Therefore, they build on the strengths of students, are student-centered, and motivate their students.

Besides just focusing on teachers, schools and districts have found ways to create school environments that support resiliency. Waxman, Gray, and Padrón (2004b, p. 52) described how the Minneapolis Public Schools have developed resiliency policies. Their resiliency policies centered around five strategies:

1. Offer opportunities for students to develop personal relationships with teachers.
2. Increase students’ sense of mastery in their lives.
3. Build student social competencies as well as academic skills.
4. Reduce the stressors that students do not need to face.
5. Generate school and community resources to support the needs of students.

When taken together, there is an enormous research base centered on teachers and their power in supporting ELLs and students of poverty

in achievement. Teachers do hold the power in creating classroom communities that either support students or deter them in their academic accomplishments.

Social Interaction in the Classroom

In order to learn, students need to construct meaning (Dillon, 2000), and they do this through talking and writing. In all the discoveries about exemplary teachers, especially exemplary teachers of ELLs, one central discovery is that they provide language-rich classrooms where children have opportunities to talk about and write about their learning. In these rooms, students are often organized into pairs or small groups to provide opportunities for language in support of learning. Language-rich classrooms don't just exist. Much thought goes into creating successful ones. For example, teachers need to think through how students respond in whole-class discussions. Young children need to understand what is expected. Can they just talk when someone else finishes or must they raise their hand? Are there limits to how long they can talk? What happens at centers? Can they work with peers or must they be quiet?

It is important for teachers to find ways to actively engage students in all instruction. Teachers might simply have all students respond with a "yes" to a simple question, such as "Is Mary the name of the character in the book?" For more complex questions like "What did Mary do to show she is kind?" teachers could have students talk to a neighbor, and then a few could share with the class. Teachers can also allow children time to think before answering. For instance, all children think quietly and hold up a thumb when they have an idea. Then they could share with a partner or with the class. Archer (2007) provides a unique way for children to share with the class. As children are talking with a partner, she walks around the room and records what they say on an overhead transparency. Then, when partner discussion is concluded, she shares the overhead responses with students. For instance, she might share, "Jose said, 'Mary walked her dog, and that was kind.' Guadalupe said, 'Mary fed her dog, and that was kind.'" In this way children's voices are heard and the teacher maintains a fast pace.

Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik (1995) describe language-rich classrooms as places where students and teachers see reading, writing, listening, and speaking as one large integrated subject with no boundaries to separate them. In order to read, students and teachers must talk

about the meaning attached to the text. In order to participate in the conversation, students and the teacher must carefully listen in to learn and appropriately respond. And writing is seen as a way to engage thinking for more productive conversation. Pappas et al. (1995) see teachers as supporting the efforts of students as they learn to use language to learn.

In addition to building a language-rich classroom, teachers face other challenges when they work with ELLs. They must help students move from home to school language, and they must support students in using English as a language for conversation and learning (Cummins, 2003). This is no easy task, however, as ELLs can be quiet or can respond in single-word answers as they learn to converse in English. Moreover, students' conceptions of language, literacy, and culturally appropriate ways of doing school are influenced by the experiences they bring to school (Gutierrez, Basquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997, p. 369). And these experiences are often very different from those routinely engaged in at school. (See Chapter 4 for specific ideas about oral language development.)

TAKE A MOMENT

Think about the language strengths of a child as he or she enters school. What does he or she typically know about literacy? Now think about what happens when this child can no longer use his or her language to share knowledge in the classroom.

Gutierrez (2001) states, “language, the most powerful mediating tool for mediating learning, in this case the children’s primary language, is excluded from the students’ learning tool kit” (p. 565). She recognizes that ELLs must build a new language tool kit to accomplish literacy proficiency in English-only classrooms. This new tool kit takes time to develop as children adjust the knowledge they have in their home language to the new language expectations in school. In addition, this means moving from the more informal language of home to the more academic language of school.

The centrality of language to learning is an issue that teachers of ELLs wrestle with as they provide instruction. Many ELLs, upon entry into school, typically preschool or kindergarten, are expected to communicate only through a new language—English. With annual yearly

progress expectations from the No Child Left Behind Act, these students are often expected to achieve the same literacy competencies as their peers whose first language is English. Few of these students ever have extra time in school to learn about reading and writing in English as they learn the language. They are typically allotted the same amount of time as students who come to school familiar with English to meet grade-level expectations. This is an enormous challenge for students, teachers, and parents (Nieto, 1999). Strategies to support language in the classroom are more fully detailed in Chapter 4.

Rules and Routines

The best way to keep students focused on learning is to establish consistent and predictable routines—routines that can be internalized by students so their single focus is on instruction. Sometimes, teachers complain that the day is too routine, and there is no room for spontaneity. We are not suggesting that teachers do not respond to occasional once-in-a-lifetime occurrences (like a fire truck's appearance at school), but irregularity in routines and rules leaves students guessing and insecure about what is expected of them, especially students who must employ incredible energy to understand the messages of their teacher.

In the United States, there is great variability in how schools and teachers structure routines like transitions. In other countries, especially Asian countries, routines are discrete. Each daily routine is divided by class periods, much like those in U.S. high schools. For example, in China, for every 50-minute class, students get a 10-minute break, which allows them to go to the bathroom and to get a drink. In other countries, transitions from one event to another may be less structured. So students come to U.S. classrooms with little to no experience with classroom routines to very specific experiences in how transitions and other routines occur.

While many rules and routines can be jointly constructed with students, some routines need to be established before school begins. For example, how are students dismissed to go to the bathroom or get a drink? How and when can a student interrupt the teacher during small-group work? How do students enter and leave the classroom?

It is important that students know what the typical schedule is. They know that the day begins on the carpet where they share. Then

they go to centers. Following centers, their teacher shares a story, and so on. These routines become the glue that holds the school day together. When the routine is changed, children constantly wonder and question what comes next.

We have seen teachers create a few important rules for young students. For instance, they discuss how they might make the classroom a safe place. Students suggest ways to do this and teachers record the responses on a chart. Figure 1.4 shows a chart created by kindergarten students with their teacher's help. The teacher has included the names of the students, so that students can use these names to remember what was said.

Students expect teachers to maintain order and to discipline students who disrupt learning. They want teachers to:

- Uphold classroom rules.
- Privately discipline students who misbehave.
- Apply a clear set of consequences to students who misbehave.
- Involve parents or the principal when necessary (Brown, 2002).

Delpit (1995) asserts that effective classrooms are those where there are clear expectations and inappropriate behaviors are dealt with consistently and immediately.

In many early-childhood classrooms, discipline simply means teachers redirect a child from a situation in which he or she is out of control to a different one in which he or she can regain control. For example, when John is pushing over the blocks in the block area and other children complain, his teacher moves him to an easel where he can paint alone for a while. Children quickly learn that when they have pushed the expectations for an activity, they will be removed.

<p>Be safe. Maria said, "No one should push." Carlos said, "Don't hit." Helen said, "Sit nice."</p> <p>Be kind. Mike said, "Say nice things." Jasmin said, "Help my friends."</p>

FIGURE 1.4. Kindergarten rule chart.

In first- and second-grade classrooms, we have seen teachers who request that the child go to a table and write in a problem-solving journal as a way of decompressing the situation. We saw one child write, “I was yelling and I am having a hard time.” Another wrote, “I hit Mario and I had to go think.” These teachers are using writing as a way for students to express their feelings appropriately while they settle down before reentering the classroom community. As they develop writing competency, ELLs often use drawings to convey these messages or they may write in their home language.

While teachers often struggle with this part of their curriculum, students want to know what to expect and the consequences if they misbehave. They respond to teachers who are consistent and lessen their anxiety about being a capable student in their classroom.

Differentiated Instruction

All classes have children with a wide range of ability and knowledge. Classrooms filled with students who speak other languages are even more diverse. Some children try English more frequently and become conversant more quickly than others. Others have reading, writing, or content knowledge that they bring to their classroom, while others have limited worldly experiences.

Such varied backgrounds require teachers to organize a portion of their instruction into small groups. These groups might be based on:

- Individual or group assessment where the teacher targets certain skills or strategies.
- Interest assessments where small groups of students work together on a topic or project.
- Personalities of students (e.g., not putting all shy students together).
- Varied language backgrounds so that students can support and scaffold the language of peers.
- Knowledge or vocabulary background; the teacher groups students to develop this background prior to a whole-class lesson.

Importantly, even when these groups are based on ability level, they are never constant. Teachers regroup students when appropriate. They also construct multiple groupings in their classroom so that students

work with pairs, in ability groups, in heterogeneous groups, and so on.

ELLs bring additional issues with regard to grouping. If a class consists predominantly of children with a home language of Spanish, and the teacher groups them together, they will speak Spanish. Although the students are communicating, they are not moving to English communication. Thus teachers need to consider the purpose of the groupings and how they will support students in communicating in English.

We have observed that groups of young children are very aware of home language. For instance, they speak Spanish until an English-only speaking child enters the group. They often test to see if the new child knows Spanish. If not, they chat with each other in Spanish and translate for the new student. In these groupings, students have an opportunity to speak their home language but with the additional expectation that they translate to English. In mixed-home-language situations, there is often much talk about the differences in languages. Language becomes important and a topic for conversation.

Paley (1981) shares kindergarten children's talk as they worked in her classroom. In one of these conversations, the children engage in a discussion about language. Here is a snippet of this conversation that was triggered because many of the children in this room spoke other languages.

DEANA: If you live in a different country, there's a different language there.

WARREN: Wherever your mother was born.

PALEY: Your mother was born in China, but you speak English.

WARREN: I'm going to go to Chinese school on Saturdays when I am six.

EDDIE: Someone has to teach you. My brother didn't know one word when he was born. Not even his name. (p. 117)

The strength of this conversation is that it allows students to focus on language and issues related to it. These kinds of conversations take place more easily in classrooms where multiple languages are spoken. They allow children to explore language metalinguistically, and such exploration leads to more sophisticated comparisons of language in later grades.

Another grouping of ELLs is based on providing background knowledge or vocabulary in a preteaching situation. Teachers consider the whole-group literacy instruction that is scheduled to occur. They analyze the text for unfamiliar language or content experiences and group students whose comprehension may suffer because of these issues. In this grouping they preteach important vocabulary and content necessary for understanding. Then when the whole-class lesson is shared, these students come to it as experts. They participate fully in the lesson and are successful members of the class.

Teachers of ELLs also differentiate during whole-class instruction. They tailor questions to the oral language competency of students. For instance, if the class is learning about animals, the teacher may hold up a picture of a cow. One child may be asked to point to the cow while another may be asked to complete a language form: "This is a. . . ." A third child may be asked to describe the cow. Each child successfully participated in the lesson because of his or her teacher's knowledge of each child's language strengths.

Differentiated instruction allows teachers to target instruction to the strengths and needs of individual students. It facilitates having students reach grade-level benchmark expectations.

INTERSECTIONS OF PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Not surprisingly, the physical and the social and emotional environments in a class often overlap. Clearly, if the physical environment does not support learning, children become off-task and have difficulty participating appropriately in the classroom. Similarly, the social and emotional environment in the classroom may support small-group work with rich conversation, for example, but if the classroom is not configured to support small-group spaces small-group work will not be very effective.

While it is important for both environments in the classroom to be in synchrony, we believe it is most important at the beginning of the day and the academic year. Bringing children into a new room and perhaps their first school experience is critical to future comfort and success. These beginning times also signal to parents how respected their child will be at school.

Beginning of the Year

To help at this important time, we offer several suggestions.

1. Have the room ready with children's names when possible. Have a sign on the door or outside the door that greets new students in multiple languages.

2. Have the classroom door open so that families feel comfortable entering and looking around before they leave their child. Be welcoming even though there are many details that most likely need attending to. If possible have another adult available who speaks the home language of the majority of parents.

3. If possible, send a letter of welcome to families (at least in English and Spanish) and invite them to the classroom before school begins so that children are comfortable in the new surroundings.

4. In some preschools and kindergartens, new students are invited to spend a day at school before they formally begin. If this is possible allow one or two children a day to stay and get familiar with the classroom. When students are too afraid to stay, encourage their parents to stay with them.

5. Ask parents to share a literacy event with you that you can share with the class. Later on, parents may bring samples of reading and writing their child does at home. Invite parents to become a part of the learning community. They may share a tradition, read a story, or help with writing.

6. Send home a booklet of important information about your class. Parents need to know what the expectations are for the year. Be explicit.

7. Make up plastic bags or some other appropriate container so that children can carry books home and back from the first day of school.

Beginning of the School Day

Once the first day of school arrives, there are many ways that teachers can transition students into the classroom. They can:

1. Greet children and parents at the classroom door. Practice saying hello in many languages and try these hellos out as you greet

parents and children. If parents follow you into the room, let them. However, stay focused on the children and their instruction.

2. Establish what happens when children enter the room. Do they go to circle? Do they go to their desks? Create a routine that does not change.

3. Have all materials ready for instruction, so there is no downtime during the day.

4. Find time to learn about students' out-of-school experiences. Some teachers allow a few children to share each day orally. Other teachers create a message that contains one or two children's experiences written together and then read. We observed one kindergarten teacher who created home journals. Each journal had a copy of the alphabet and "word wall" words, words that the teacher had on the wall and students recognized immediately. Each day children took their journal home, wrote in it, and brought it back to school. The teacher read each journal as a way to begin the day. Children listened closely to the messages of their classmates. Later, as the journals were filled with messages, she asked students to reread them and to discover what was most important about their lives outside school.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In this chapter we explored the underpinnings of successful classrooms, especially for students who come to school with a language other than English. We highlighted the many environments that exist within a classroom and how they can work together or in opposition. Without this foundation, we believe that the literacy strategies shared in later chapters will not be very successful. A well-managed, culturally sensitive classroom is essential to the learning of all students and in particular ELLs.